

ROBERT J. BLANCH and JULIAN N. WASSERMAN, *From Pearl to Gawain. Forme to Fynismnt*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995. Pp. 207. ISBN 0-8130-1348-8. \$39.95.

This is a book about reading all four poems in the late-14th-/early-15th-century British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x—from the beginning ('forme') with *Pearl*, through *Cleanness* ('Purity') and *Patience*, to the end ('fynismnt'), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It is generally assumed these days (though by no means has it been definitively proven) that the four poems are by the same author, often called 'The Gawain Poet'—since the last work is the best known, best loved, and has inspired the longest bibliography. It is also the poem, presumably, that will be of greatest interest to Arthurians.

But the presumed author is just as often called—from the opening poem in the MS—'The Pearl Poet,' which suggests a re-contextualizing of the Gawain story along with a new set of relationships in the whole MS that can be explored. Blanch and Wasserman set out to explore these, assuming 'not only that the works share a common author but that they are connected and intersect in fundamental ways that work against discussion in isolation' (2).

The authors are thus very consciously not attempting to provide sets of close-readings; the process of moving from beginning to end does not aim to describe some new meta-work in four parts, but instead emphasizes continuities and thematic developments, and the way various poems can provide glosses for each other. It is thus logical within their lights to find that Arthur shares 'much in common with Belshazzar' for his 'improper stewardship of the word' (8), even if this seems to privilege abstract pattern over generically influenced nuance and tone. The authors intend it such, stating that, 'In short, the similarity that causes one object, trope, or even poem to gloss another is privileged over the individualizing difference so important in modern thinking' (4).

This last statement sums up both the strengths and the weaknesses of the authors' mode of presentation. For what unfolds as an explication of Salvation-history and the cycles of human error and redemption has the planar clarity of a large but abstract map, even as it lacks the texture and particular charm of any single story worked out within its own borders.

Each chapter offers a separate itinerary. The first, 'As Good as Your Word: Language, Culture, and Building Blocks of History,' explores the poet's concern 'with language and culture and their roles in the historical continuum which underlies and unifies all four poems in the manuscript' (8) Defining a fourteenth-century society as a 'speech community' leads to a discovery of the homiletic theme of the destabilizing effects of the privatization of language, so that Camelot is viewed as 'a doomed city within the context of the poet's apocalyptic vision' (14), that is to say, 'a type of Babel with each member using his own unique language to encode, to hide, rather than to disclose meaning' (24). Thus Arthur reveals an 'inability to act as the linguistic center of his own society' (21) as he fails to decode the challenge of the Green Knight and (with his court) to understand the true meaning of the lesson Gawain has learned. Arthurians will note, perhaps with some distress, that the homiletic tilt of such

argument tends to emphasize Arthur's shortcomings as a moral hero, so that 'childishness' in the text's description tends to be treated as a moral blindness.

Chapter Two, 'As Good as a Handshake: Covenantal History and the Fate of *Monkynde*,' explores the dimension of one's word, of word-as-bond, formalizing it as 'the power of covenant, the express power of law' (28). To be sure, much of *Sir Gawain* connects to this theme, yet there is much to discover in the other works in the manuscript in terms of 'the covenantal theology upon which are founded the Old Testament stories of *Purity* and the New Testament parable of the workers in the vineyard in *Pearl*' (43). If there is a fault in this chapter, it cannot be that of hermeneutic rashness, but rather of an aesthetic lack of decorum—for our tour-guides traverse enchanted ground in too-heavy boots. Jeanne T. Mathewson in her useful 1990 critical review of Gawain-scholarship, 'SGGK: Twenty More Years of Fascination' (*King Arthur Through the Ages*, vol.I) takes note of the authors' earlier presentation of this material in several essays, concluding that 'These studies, although inessential to interpretation, do not overpower the poem with insistence on their importance' (222). Unfortunately, their re-appearance in this chapter only lives up to the first part of Mathewson's formulation, for now the inessential has been, through iteration, drawn out into the tedious.

On the other hand, during the course of the third chapter, 'Pardon the Interruption: The Miracles of God and the Covenant of *Kynde*,' the reader can see the best handiwork of the authors, as they focus 'on the role of miracles...a sense of the 'mervayle' as a deliberately transrational sign, the function of which represents paradoxically the beginning of true understanding' (10, 11). Arthurians, of course, are well versed in the wonders of romance; this study traverses a more theological route, not so much refuting the wondertales' delight in strange things and monsters as adventuring into a parallel universe. The authors add this expert summary: 'we will note that *Pearl* presents the reader with an explanation of *kynde* and divine process; *Purity* introduces the metaphor of the earthly miracle as the workings of God's "honde"; *Patience* serves to define God's "hondewerk," and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presents a tropologic argument on the use of hands and sin' (46).

Note three things about that last sentence: (1) one can read it with interest without foregrounding the repetitive occurrence of *hand*-words, and not until the next chapter will one discover the exertions being made to bring forward 'hands' iconically and thematically; (2) although the authors regularly refer to 'the poet,' what these works seem to do is 'present,' 'introduce,' 'define,' and give an 'argument'—which is to say, their 'poetic' qualities are so taken for granted as to be vaporized in the white heat of thematic analysis; hence, (3) the term, 'tropologic,' reminds us that the authors appear most comfortable traversing the route between Augustinian hermeneutics and modern Semiotics.

Whereas the next, the fourth, chapter, 'Tools of the Trade: the Hand of God, The Hand of Man,' is manual labor with a sense of strain. And there are hands and more hands, including 29 figures of manuscript miniatures with significant representations of hands and fingers. (The Cotton manuscript's own collection of miniatures are included at this point.) The authors claim that 'The image of the hand, both divine

and human, serves as a major unifying thread' in the presentation of the miraculous in the Gawain-Poet's works' (10). Here, it would seem, a small point more suited for *Notes & Queries* has been expanded beyond deserving or persuasiveness. In the process, list-making has displaced lexical sensitivity: as for example, in the assumption that citations with verbal forms of 'to handle' are part of the imagery of hands. Not without more apparent foregrounding, they're not; and one sees here the unfortunate evidence of Procrustean categorizing and tendentious generalizing—a defect of the privileging of 'similarities' in the program of inter-textual glossing.

Their fifth, and final, chapter is 'Quicker than the "I": The Hand of the Poet and the Pronouns of Narrative.' They 'scrutinize the idea of the poet in his position as maker of a fictive world,' making the interesting point that 'the narrators of *Purity*, *Patience*, and *Gawain* are active storytellers, frequently intruding into their respective creations much like the actively intervening God...' (11). The body of evidence considered here comes from 'the poet's manipulations of pronouns...in order to create the shifting axes of narrator-character and narrator-reader...' (11). Finally, Arthurian readers, if following the authors to their end, may be surprised and/or charmed to find that *Pearl* has displaced *Sir Gawain*, and that the great cyclical turning that the latter text opens and closes with, is now discovered in the former, in whose beginning is our end...as even their final sentence demonstrates.

But just who will these 'Arthurians' be who can profit from this book? They certainly will not be undergraduates, who would normally need translations or glosses for the difficult dialect of this manuscript which is quoted without mediation. They certainly could be graduate students: the authors' great familiarity with these texts, and their previous publications of bibliographies and editions of essays that deal with these poems give great authority to the notes and cross-references that are lavishly provided. The 'serious student' of the Pearl/Gawain-Poet will find this a useful station on the way to a survey of scholarship.

But not too serious! Let the student, the teacher, and the lover of medieval stories treat this volume as an extensive emporium of scholarly resource; but let them, once loaded and equipped, never confuse being ready with being there—let them haul hastily to the highlands and resume breathing the bracing oxygen of literary play.

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